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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: EARLY SNOW MELT FORCES LARGE WATER RELEASE FROM
TURKEY'S EUPHRATES DAMS

REF: DAMASCUS 1469

1. An early snow-melt in north-eastern Turkey filled Turkey's Euphrates dams, forcing authorities to release a record amount of water downstream to Syria and Iraq. For ten days beginning March 11, and for the first time since building the dams, Turkey opened reservoir spillways to release as much as 2,500 cubic meters per second. The normal flow for the spring season averages about 800 cubic meters per second. By March 22, the flow of water to Syria had declined to 1,358 cubic meters per second and Turkish officials told us that the northern-most reservoir (Keban) now has enough excess storage capacity to handle the remaining snow melt.

2. CPA and U.S. military officials in Iraq had been concerned that, had the extraordinary flow continued for long, rising waters could have forced some military units to move their bases. MFA has agreed to supply embassy REO with weekly information on water flow to Syria (Euphrates) and Iraq (Tigris), which we will pass on to CPA.

3. Turkish authorities informed the Syrian government ahead of the release. Their embassy and consulate in Aleppo reported that the high flow did not result in any flooding in Syria. MFA Water Department Head Mithat Rende took the opportunity to point out that the much-criticized Turkish dams provide a critical service to Syria and Iraq, preventing flooding in the spring and ensuring water flow in the dry months of summer. He said that before the dams were constructed spring floods regularly devastated villages and farmland along the river. For example, in 1967, the flow of water to Syria reached 10,000 cubic meters per second.

4. Turkey has constructed an extensive system of Euphrates dams, which can store 90.66 cubic kilometers of water. This is roughly equivalent to three years' flow into Syria. The largest dam -- Ataturk -- has a capacity of almost 50 cubic kilometers. The Euphrates river basin covers almost 122,000 square miles in Turkey, collecting 33 cubic kilometers of water each year.

5. The former director of Turkey's State Hydraulics Agency and Professor at Middle East Technical University, Dogan Altinbilek, shared with us his estimates for the annual water flow along the Euphrates. Of the 33 cubic kilometers of water collected in Turkey's portion of the Euphrates basin, about 17 is released into Syria. Syria's tributaries add about 2 cubic kilometers and Syria uses about 5.5, leaving 13.5 for Iraq. Because Iraq uses 15.5 cubic kilometers from the Euphrates, it would be dry before reaching the Gulf if not supplemented by water from the Tigris, according to Altinbilek's estimates.

Baghdad Minimize Considered
EDELMAN